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ABSTRACT

This lesson uses artworks as inspiration for narrative writing: students in grades 6-8 will have the chance to think critically about their interpretations of the events in an image and to write a story that tells background on the image or extends details on what has happened. During two 50-minute lessons, students will: demonstrate knowledge of the characteristics of narratives (e.g., sequence, storytelling); explore connections between images and words; and use detailed vocabulary to write their text. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the lesson are included. (RS)

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ED 476 413

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: From Image to Detailed Narrative

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Grade Band

6-8

Estimated Lesson Time

Two 50-minute sessions

Overview

The old cliche "A picture is worth a thousand words" is put to the test in this lesson. While students may not actually write exactly a thousand words, they will have the chance to think critically about their interpretations of the events in an image and to write about those ideas. Simply distribute or show a picture that tells a story and then encourage students to brainstorm words and ideas about the image before writing a story that tells background on the image or extends details on what has happened.

Click to enlarge image

Later British painting by Cotman
image copyright 2003 www.clipart.com

From Theory to Practice

Multilevel classes offer special challenges for the teacher. With the burgeoning numbers of special-needs students in our language arts classes, including those who speak English as a second language, teachers need to find assignments that are open-ended enough for each student. With this assignment, all students can find success "where they are" as we address culture, vocabulary, voice, and characterization in specific contexts.

This lesson uses artworks as inspiration for narrative writing. Why use artwork? As Rochelle I. Frei (1999) explains, art "can be used the same way as written text can to expand children's knowledge of the world, and to understand what children do when they make sense of that world. . . . Art can provide a window into how children negotiate their understandings of images and their knowledge of the world" (386). In Frei's project, students explain their understanding of pieces of art, revealing details about their literacy processes and strategies. The same kinds of revelations, likely on a more advanced level, are revealed in this lesson, where students explore background actions and other narratives related to the art they study.

Peggy Albers, in "Literacy in the Arts," believes "if we want children to represent meaning visually, musically, and/or dramatically, along with their written texts—in other words, to create a semiotic system—we have a responsibility to teach them how to create meaning in many sign systems" (8). Albers's work provides useful theoretical background supporting connecting art and writing in the classroom.

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Read More

Albers, Peggy. "Literacy in the Arts." *Primary Voices K-6* 9.4 (April 2001): 3-9.

Frei, Rochelle I. "Making Meaning with Art: Children's Stories." *Language Arts* 76.5 (May 1999): 386-382.

This lesson was adapted from Gail Servoss's teaching idea in NCTE's Standards Consensus Series book, *Motivating Writing in Middle School* (1996), pp. 17-19.

Student Objectives

Students will

- demonstrate knowledge of the characteristics of narratives (e.g., sequence, storytelling).
- explore connections between images and words.
- use detailed vocabulary to write their text.

Resources

- Time Line Tool
- Board and markers or chalk
- Copies of a picture that tells a story, or links to online pictures
- General classroom supplies

Instructional Plan

Resources

- Copies of a picture that tells a story (see online resources below)
- Chalk board and chalk, erasable board and markers, or chart paper and markers
- General classroom supplies (paper, pens, and so forth)

Preparation

1. Find a "Norman Rockwell"-type picture, i.e., any picture that is telling a story with people and a clear situation. *The Saturday Evening Post* is one source for this kind of picture. You can also look at online art gallery resources (listed below, in the Web Resources).

2. Copy the picture for each student and have the original available for fine details.

Instruction and Activities

1. Distribute the picture to the students.

2. Ask students to examine the picture individually for a few minutes, jotting down on a piece of scratch paper or in their writer's notebooks any features or details that they notice.

3. Consulting their notes as necessary, students brainstorm about the possible events and characters this picture illustrates. As students share their ideas, place the words or phrases under headings such as Character, Setting, Situation, and Vocabulary (see example).

   This is especially helpful for nonnative speakers, who may need help with vocabulary and spelling.

Of course, this step may be only oral for native speakers.

4. Ask students to write from one character's point of view. They may write about the character's feelings and thoughts, tell the story that leads up to the picture, or narrate the events that follow. Encourage students not only to describe the picture but to invent an original story related to the event illustrated. Students can sketch out the sequence of events for their narratives using the Time Line Tool.

5. Remind students of the characteristics of narrative writing. You might write the information on a piece of chart paper or on the board so that writers can refer to the list while working.

    - Focuses a clear, well-defined incident or series of related events.
    - Develops plot, character, and setting with specific detail.
    - Orders events clearly.
    - Uses description and dialogue as appropriate to develop setting and character.
    - Shows events rather than just telling about them.
    - Establishes and maintains a tone and point of view.
    - Uses a logical and effective pattern of organization, such as chronological order, flashback, or flash-forward.
    - Uses transitional words and phrases to maintain coherence and establish sequence within and between paragraphs.

6. Based on student need and experience with writing narratives, you might add one or more mini-lessons that will help students complete their work. Any of the following items would make excellent mini-lessons for writers composing narratives:

    - creating a lead:
      Leading to Great Places in the Middle School Classroom

    - characterization:
      Bright Morning: Exploring Character Development in Fiction or
      Using Picture Books to Teach Characterization in Writing Workshop

    - connotation and details:
      She Did What? Revising for Connotation

    - setting:
      Using Picture Books to Teach Setting Development in Writing Workshop

    - punctuating dialogue:
      Inside or Outside? A Mini-Lesson on Quotation Marks and More

    - paragraphing dialogue:
      Character Clash: A Mini-Lesson on Paragraph Breaks and Dialogue

7. If you want students to create a more formal piece of writing, allow additional class sessions for them to revise, type, and edit their papers. Alternately, you might have students do simple "first draft" writing, or write in their journals or writer's notebooks.

Web Resources

The following online museum Web sites provide images of many pictures that students can use for this lesson.

Norman Rockwell Museum

http://www.nrm.org/
The Norman Rockwell Museum pages include background and details on many of Rockwell's works. Be sure to check the "Current Exhibits" links for images of the paintings currently on tour.

American Masters Database of Visual Artists
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/database_visual_arts.html
This PBS-sponsored Web site includes paintings and other works of visual art by American artists ranging from Richard Avedon to Andy Warhol.

WebMuseum, Paris
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/
The "Artist Index" to the WebMuseum collection of online images of paintings, drawing, sculpture, and other artwork provides access to numerous classic images.

Online Tours of the National Gallery of Art
http://www.nga.gov/onlinetours/onlinetr.htm
Visit the Washington Gallery of Art without leaving your computer! You can choose one of the many images available as the focus for your students' narratives.

Student Assessment/Reflections

The results of this activity range from a restatement of the vocabulary from the brainstorming on the board or chart paper to a detailed story with fleshed-out characterizations, depending upon the student and his or her abilities; therefore, a variety of finished products may result, each reflecting individual student's efforts.

- If students write their stories in their journals, you might read and simply note things that stand out as specific and well-detailed.
- If students complete multiple drafts of this piece, you could use the Peer Review: Narrative lesson plan to give students the chance to do self-assessment and revise their texts. Then use similar guidelines to respond to their writing.
- You might use a narrative rubric such as Chronological Narrative Rubric or the ISAT Student-Friendly Writing Rubric for Narrative.

NCTE/IRA Standards

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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read·write·think

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